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ABSTRACT

Varsity student-athletes (SAs) in National Collegiate Athletic Association member institutions encounter obstacles to their academic achievement that non-athletes do not, such as time for physical training and practice, and travel away from campus for games. A program is described that provides support for SAs. The Student-Athlete Academic Support Program (SAASP) originated in 1994 and is based on a single goal: that all of the institution's SAs "graduate prepared." The program content includes: (1) "career maturity" or knowing what careers are available, knowing the academic prerequisites for careers of interest, and spending time with someone in the target career; (2) a grade point average sufficiently high for competitive graduate admission, and study skills competence; and (3) developing a self-image as a student-scholar. The objective of the SAASP is to improve the academic performance, retention, and graduation rate of all SAs. Existing staff, academic coordinators for each sport, are part of the program team. They are immediate role models for the SAs and enhance the SAs internalization of an academic identity. A close relationship is also maintained with the college career planning office through regular meetings with its staff and SAs. Mandated study-time, study skills workshops, and tutoring services are additional components of the program. (JLS)

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A Division III Student-Athlete Academic Support Program Model

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Abstract

College varsity student-athletes (SAs) encounter considerably more obstacles than their non-athlete peers as they strive toward academic achievement. This circumstance is well documented at the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I (DI) level, where such institutions provide general academic counseling services to all of their recruited SAs. Most Division III (DIII) SAs face challenges similar to those confronted by DI SAs without the luxury of such academic support. The current authors outline a model DIII academic-support program at their institution to include: goals, components, rationale for components, and preliminary data which evaluate the effectiveness of the program.

Introduction/Statement of Problem

Varsity student-athletes (SAs) in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institutions encounter several obstacles to their academic achievement (e.g., required physical training; demands placed upon them by their coaches, their institutions, and the NCAA; time requirements for training, travel, and games) that their non-athlete peers typically do not confront. Recognizing this, the NCAA has approved legislation requiring that Division I (DI) institutions provide general academic counseling for all of their recruited SAs. However, no such academic-support requirement exists for non-athletic-scholarship-granting NCAA Division III (DIII) institutions. Yet one can argue that DIII SAs are much more similar to their DI SA peers, in terms of obstacles to academic achievement (such as those mentioned above), than to their non-athlete peers. And since SAs represent both DI and DIII institutions, DIII institutions clearly stand to benefit from their SAs' sacrifices, just as the higher-profile DI institutions benefit. In light of these circumstances, the current authors have been involved in building the

Student-Athlete Academic Support Program (SAASP) at their DIII institution. (This college, one of the 12 arts and sciences colleges within the SUNY System, is located in rural Northern New York. It has an undergraduate enrollment of about 4200, of which approximately 200 are SAs who participate in a total of 11 varsity sports (six for women and five for men). There are 16 academic coordinators (ACs) in total, including at least one for each varsity sports team, who work with the SAASP.)

SAASP Goal, Objectives and Components

Goal and Objectives

The program, originated in 1994, is based upon a single goal: that all of the institution's SAs "graduate prepared." This preparation includes a high level of "career maturity" (i.e., knowing what careers are available, knowing about the academic prerequisites for careers of interest, having spent time with someone who currently is in a career of interest, etc.), a grade-point average (gpa) sufficiently high for competitive admission to graduate schools, competence at various study skills (e.g., note-taking, essay-test taking, time management, organizational skills, etc.), and seeing one's self as being primarily a student-scholar rather than primarily an athlete. From the goal that all SAs graduate prepared stems the SAASP's primary objective of improving the academic performance, retention, and graduation rates of all SAs. The program strives to meet its goal by utilizing, as much as possible, existing on-campus student-support services, or at least inexpensive additions to those services already available on campus.

Components

Currently, five specific program components are in place. They include: (1) the work of team ACs, (2) a linkage with the college's career-planning office, (3) a thrice-weekly mandated

study time for all first-semester SAs and all other SAs whose gpa is below a 2.30, (4) a series of study-skills workshops for SAs, and (5) tutoring opportunities made available during times and in places that are convenient for SAs.

ACs. Tinto (1987) suggested that college students who have frequent, individual contact with academic faculty members are more likely to stay enrolled in school than are those who do not. This phenomenon apparently stems from the sense of "community" that students achieve from ongoing out-of-class contacts with even one faculty member. Additionally, the quality and availability of academic advising that students receive may ordinarily vary greatly from advisor to advisor. The SAASP has sought to address these points by ensuring that each sports team has one or more ACs, recruited as volunteers from the ranks of regular full-time teaching faculty by the SAASP's director, to serve in an informal academic-advisory role for that team.

A Link with the College's Career Planning Office. The director of the college's career-planning office meets each semester with all SAs, and SAs are strongly encouraged to attend individual follow-up sessions with career-planning office personnel. The purpose of these meetings is to discuss careers, connections between SAs' current academic activities and possible post-college careers, and means by which SAs can acquire career-related experience (e.g., through internships, "job shadowing," summer jobs, etc.).

Mandated Study Time, Study Skills Workshops, and Tutoring Opportunities. These three components are intertwined, and each is targeted directly at improving SAs' academic performance and study skills. First, SAs who are in their first semester on campus, or who have below a 2.30 gpa, are required to be in attendance at three 90-minute evening study sessions per week. These SAs are considered to be at greatest academic risk; thus, there is a concerted effort

to help them establish good study habits. Meanwhile, all SAs, whether or not they are required to be in attendance during the study times, are offered individual study-skills workshops. This aspect of the SAASP makes the assumption that even highly intelligent students can benefit from an opportunity to improve their study skills. Finally, since nearly all students eventually encounter one or more courses with which they can use some tutoring assistance, such services are made available at times that conform to SAs' rather unusual daily schedules.

Additional Notes Regarding the SAASP

The SAASP is built upon three other core ideas. First, since the athletic director and coaches have an enormous potential impact upon their SAs, their full support and cooperation is essential if the program is to succeed. Second, it is important that ACs be given every opportunity to use their skills, talents, and interests as academic advisors efficiently and in productive ways. Third, if the SAASP is to undergo sustained improvement, there must be both evaluative research at the local level (aimed at making productive changes in the program) and an ongoing literature review (whereby those involved with the SAASP can discover what is happening at other colleges, and how shared knowledge can help improve both the SAASP and similar academic-support programs elsewhere).

Program Evaluation

The program is relatively new. Thus, in terms of estimating its impact on SA gpa, full comparisons of pre- and post-intervention academic-performance data are not yet available, and such comparisons will not be able to be made in a meaningful way until at least one SA cohort has been in the program for four years.

However, survey results involving all SAs, regarding their thoughts about the program's

components, have been collected. In both 1995 and 1996, questionnaires, containing approximately thirty questions employing primarily a Likert Scale format (ranging from 1 to 7--e.g., "not at all" to "always") were distributed to most of the SAs on campus, as we sought their input in areas including: attitudes toward the mandatory study sessions; self-perception of their study skills; impression of the effectiveness and availability of their ACs; and past, or planned, utilization of the Career Planning Office. In 1996, we followed up these questionnaires by conducting qualitative interviews with a small sample of the full SA population.

Among findings, analyses comparing SA responses in 1995 with those in 1996 indicated a significant ($p<.05$) improvement in SAs' perception of ACs' value and helpfulness. Also, combined analyses of questionnaires completed in both years indicated that SAs generally appreciated, and found that they benefitted from, the work done by their team's ACs. Finally, in terms of "positive" questionnaire results, we found (somewhat surprisingly, given that it is required for many of them) that an average of 48% (50 out of 104) of the SAs surveyed in each of 1995 and 1996, who had to be in attendance during the study time, found it beneficial, rather than punitive.

Analyses of the parts of the questionnaire that targeted SAs' perceptions of the usefulness of the career-planning component and the study-skills workshops were disappointing. SAs consistently reported either being unaware that these two aspects of the SAASP even existed, or else greatly underutilizing them. Therefore, one area in which the SAASP must improve is in making certain that SAs are aware of both the existence, and the usefulness, of these two program components. For example, one suggestion we are considering is that each SA would be required to schedule an annual meeting with a member of the Career Planning Office staff.

Finally, we need to ensure, perhaps by canvassing SAs early in the academic year, that the topics of the study-skills workshops are in areas that SAs realize that they need help.

Summary

The evaluation of the Student-Athlete Academic Support Program (SAASP) is ongoing, and future reports will be made available by the authors of this report. It is hoped that lessons learned from studying the SAASP at SUNY Potsdam could serve as a valuable guide for those at other institutions who also seek to support the academic achievement of student-athletes.

References

Tinto, V. (1987). Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.